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Marginality, educational opportunity and access to higher education

Original Article

Marginality, Educational Opportunity and Access to Higher Education: Experiences of Scheduled Caste and Tribe Students in India

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Abstract

This paper is based on the empirical data of the marginal section students who have come under the purview of the National Fellowship system at higher education level in India. The objective of the study is to find out their experiences with respect to the national fellowship system as a public policy measure and their educational attainment, participation and achievements within public policy discourse. Also, the study explores the educational opportunity, cultural capital and the socio-economic and political attainment of the marginal section students. Where, the study is based on both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The data are analysed through descriptive and thematic analysis methods. It addresses the major questions like: does the state become cultural capital for the marginal section students? How do the students from marginal backgrounds capitalize the public policy meant for them for higher education and what are their difficulties to avail this public policy?

Keywords

Access to higher education, public policy, cultural capital, national fellowship and marginalized students

Introduction

Studies on marginalization show the evidences of deprivation and exploitation of the marginal communities. Deprivation became a pattern of cultural behaviour for suppression in Indian society due to its social structure (Bhoi & Lakra, 2017; Jodhka & Shah, 2010; Mandal, 2010). This wave of exploitation excluded some of the communities from gaining social, economic and cultural capital. The process of exploitation became more exclusionary in nature for the indigenous and marginal people, as

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they got trapped and became victims of oppression, exploitation, humiliation, deprivation and subjugation. This population suffered accumulation of knowledge, their conducts and abilities to establish their cultural capability and social status. These indigenous and marginal people in independent India are named as scheduled tribes (STs) and scheduled castes (SCs). Historically, exclusion, exploitation and isolation are major conditions of the caste and tribal society. However, the mainstream way of life pushes them away from attaining equal social, economic, educational and cultural ways of life (Bhoi & Lakra, 2019; Mandal, 2010; Singh et al., 2015).

Social scientists have been arguing that 'indigenous' and 'marginalization' concepts needs to be more inclusive into a larger socio-political discourse. However, the discourse has much more prominence and powerful in the socio-political mobilization of India. Tribes became the communalities of the sociological and anthropological discourses in India. Consequently, discourse and study have been expanded, and it has been mostly conducted from the perspective of caste, caste being a unique and pervasive feature of Indian society. So, both the tribal and caste studies engaged in caste-centric discourse, again the caste orientation of tribal studies was seen in the post-independent period with engaging the discourse of deprivation, isolation by comparing with the mainstream developmental process (Elwin, 1951). Bhoi (2020) argues the main stream developmental process neglects the SC and ST communities, who have been sufferers of deprivation, disadvantages and social exclusion; the long deprivation and oppression are still reflected in their present-day socio-educational, economic and political life as marginalization. And the process of marginalization is called marginality (Chitnis, 1981; Jiloha, 2010; Mosse 2018; Singh et al., 2015; Thorat, 2009; Thorat & Kumar, 2009).

Today, when education is the major intervention to development (Ambedkar, 1948; Benjamin, 2008; Kingdon 2007; Prakash, 2007), this study intends to examine the state's responsibility towards the education for the marginalized students, specifically, at the higher education level. With this, the study locates the marginal students' education to theorize their experiences at the higher education level. This will help to understand and transcend the phenomena for policy evolution on the issues concerning higher education inclusion connecting to accessing public policy. The enquiry to their accessibility and struggle in the discourse of public policy (national fellowship system) for attaining higher education is attained within the study concerns. Their inclusion policy and role of the state in widening participation in higher education are studied with the theory of 'cultural capital' by Bourdieu (1984) engaging with the findings in the due course. Also, the study looked at how the public policy at higher education helps the economic, social and political mobility with a framework of the social welfare model of India for the marginal sections students, including both SC and ST students. This reveals what are the barriers to their learning behaviour and their struggles to cope with their development framework. For this, marginal section students to avail state's public policy at educational spaces and their experiences to avail these policies at higher education level are looked at.

Methodology of the Study

This is an exploratory study based on both quantitative and qualitative data. Using a purposive sampling technique, the study identifies marginal section students coming from both SC and ST backgrounds. These students are enrolled in Master of Philosophy (MPhil) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) courses from all disciplines at 10 different state and central universities and institutes of India.

Primary data are collected from 350 students through a survey method. Of which 200 are from SC and 150 are from ST background. Similarly, there were 20 case studies, of which 15 are from SC and 5 are from ST background. Apart from these 10 Focus Group Discussions from both SC and ST are conducted

Table 1. Data Sample.

Serial Number	Types of Samples		SC Sample	ST Sample	Total Number of Sample
1.	Quantitative		200	150	350
2.	Quantitative	2(a) Case studies	15	05	20
		2(b) Focus group discussions	05	05	10

Source: Field Study.

together to understand these students' academic participation and achievements connecting to the social perception within the campuses at the higher education level. This is in view of social welfare measures. Semi-structured interview schedule, case study and Focus Group Discussion guides were administered respectively, for the same. As per the requirement of the study, secondary data were collected from articles, books, newspapers and other official data. Analysis of the primary data is made through descriptive statistics for quantitative data, and case studies and thematic analyses are made for qualitative data. For analysis of the secondary data, the study used textual and content analysis methods. Ethical considerations of the study are being maintained by using pseudonyms, for the cases and the universities included in the study.

Results and Discussions

The need for public policy is understood when it successfully bridges the gap between marginals and mainstream society (Blakemore & Warwick-Booth, 2013). After independence, many schemes have been adopted, and many programmes have been introduced to reach the marginals, the de-marginal process is also sometimes complex (Fraser, 2009). Through public policy addressing marginality, it comes with many steps, introduction of public policy, its accessibilities, difficulties and outcomes. In higher education, there are many policies, programmes and schemes introduced to make access to education to the marginal sections, among them scholarship schemes for SC/ST MPhil/PhD scholars are different (MSJE, 2022; MTA, 2021). How these schemers address the marginality issues and create opportunities for the marginal section students at higher educational level, and what major challenges they faced to avail the fellowship are analysed.

Marginal Communities and Their Education

In India, among the marginal communities, the SC population is 201.4 million (16.6%) and the ST population is 104.5 million (8.6%). Their literacy rate is 66.1% for SCs and 58.95% for STs, which is lower than the overall literacy rate in India, that is, 74.04 %. Among the marginal communities, the literacy rate for the males is comparatively less than 75.2% for SCs and 68.5% for STs against 82.14% overall total male literacy. Similarly, for the marginal community's literacy rate for females, it is also comparatively lower, which is 56.5% for SCs and 49.40% for STs against 65.46% total female literacy in India (Census of India, 2011).

Likewise, the educational enrolment of marginal sections at school and intermediate level is also alarming in class I–XII, which is very less, 19.3%, for SCs, 9.7% for STs, compared to about 71% for

the non-SC/ST population in India. And so, in higher education, the position of marginal communities is comparatively much lower than non-SCs/STs (ESAG, 2018). The overall higher educational enrolment of marginal community is extremely low, which is 14.9% for SCs and 5.5% for the STs, compared to 79.6% for the non-SC/ST population. Higher educational enrolment of marginal community's male is also low, which shows 14.8% for SCs and 5.4 % for STs compared to 79.8 % non-SCs/STs. Similarly, for females, higher educational enrolment for the marginal communities is likewise lower, showing 15% for SCs and 5.5% for STs compared to 79.5% non-SC/ST categories (AISHE, 2019).

These alarming figures of imbalances or differences within the literacy rates across the sections of society in India demand states' intervention for effective policy implementation to make a balanced growth in the literacy rate of the country across the diverse population in India. In particular, in higher education, the academic participation of these students needs to be focused on for better future attainments by these communities and by the nation as a whole. As a result to make this balance, the state took special efforts and made special provisions for the marginal communities in the field of education.

This study found that public policy intervention is a big support that allows the SC and ST students to get enrolled at the higher education level. About 86% of the marginal students responded they have joined higher education because of educational fellowship provided by the government as public policy intervention. However, only about 14% of students seemed to be economically sound to independently finance their higher education in India and can manage to study without any financial assistance or fellowship provided to them by the government (Field Study Data). This shows the importance of public policy interventions to meet equal participation enhancing the participation of SC and ST students in higher education.

National Fellowship System as Public Policy for Marginals

The Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship (RGNF) Scheme for SC and ST is formulated and funded by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. The scheme is open to students belonging to SC and ST categories who wish to pursue higher studies, such as MPhil and PhD degrees, across disciplines. It is initiated keeping in view the social background of the candidates for the deprived section of the society and to provide them opportunity to undertake advanced studies and research. The objective of the award is to provide fellowships in the form of financial assistance to students belonging to SC/ST to pursue higher studies for MPhil and PhD degrees (University Grants Commission (UGC, 2022).

In the discourse of accessing public policy at higher education, the *Times of India* (ToI, 2014) reports that it is challenging for the marginal section students in India. Unfolding the epistemology of the functioning of a public policy scheme, RGNF or national fellowship scheme for marginals is studied through the framework of students' experience to obtain the study objectives. The RGNF has wide coverage all over India and offers fellowships to students coming from marginal sections to universities and institutes to pursue MPhil and PhD courses. This is a promising scheme for the upliftment of the SCs and STs in higher education. Contextualizing the accessibility of this scheme by the SC/ST students, (ibid.) reports that there are many difficulties at the systemic level to access the fellowship by the students. About 3,000 students receive the RGNF; however, in the process of releasing the fellowship amount, many students face various problems. The issues discussed are long waiting time to receive the financial assistance. Despite repeated attempts to contact the funding and central administrative body of the UGC to release the fund, there is unexpected delay in disbursing the

fellowship, and denial and resistance to inquiries about the fellowships. Also, discussions abound about the delay in fellowship release or funds as universities fail to submit the utilization certificates of the previous batch students on time (Rout, 2015; ToI, 2014; UGC, 2018).

Educational Opportunity and Public Policy

Unfolding the experiences of educational opportunity, the data reveal that the educational accessibility of the SC and ST students has been hurdled by many social, economic and educational obstacles. Lacking cultural capital from their home, SC and ST students struggle with academic challenges more than the challenges with social and academic stigma and the different negative connotations attached to them. After crossing all levels of hurdles when they dream for their higher education, especially at the research level of education, these students receive a supportive hand from the state as welfare policy in the form of the national fellowship system. Through RGNF, the students from the SC/ST background get an opportunity to receive higher education that gives them an opportunity for educational attainment as compared with their previous generation/parents' education. These welfare measures of research fellowships at higher education give this population an opportunity to aspire and ride the higher ladder of education, which can revolutionize their community's traditional way of living and can contribute to attaining the status of white-collar jobs (Olssen et al., 2004).

Eighty-one per cent of the students opined that the RGNF is a boon for the SC/ST students to gain educational opportunities. In this regard, the case studies are also evident that the RGNF is the means through which they can reach up to higher education level, specially to pursue research courses at the university level; else they might have to work in the field like their traditional occupation. Through this national fellowship, education is supposed to lead them towards upward social mobility and positive change in a modern technological society, which is proven from the evidence of the narration of the students. In the same line, Wankhede (1999) argued that education helps both in educational and occupational mobility; however, Jayaram (1987) argued that it helped status retention. However, in this study, as the parents were not from higher education backgrounds, state public policy intervention helped students who came to study for higher education.

As the fellowship worked as the vehicle of economic transformation (Garcia, 1997), many of the students experience the positive mobility of the fellowship, among them Bharat (28) from SC background said:

> When I was in my village in my childhood, I had many struggles both economically and on the ground of my caste. I fought back all the struggle and had a chance to get higher education all throughout the Govt. of India scholarship and particularly this fellowship helped me a lot in my educational career allowing me to uninterruptedly do the research work.

In this section, it is argued that the RGNF fellowship served as a national fellowship for educational opportunity for marginal sections like SCs/STs. It helps in the educational development, as they utilize financial assistance for their educational expenses as their cultural capital. Here, cultural capital helps for their educational mobility, and it shows that the educational level of SC/ST students has gone high as compared with their generation/parents' education level. In contrast, Wankhede (2020) opines that the public policy affirmative action/reservation policy is not accessed by the marginal sections due to lack of information, and even few of them are aware of it and are not getting the benefit of reservation policy. Further, he argues that less than 8%SCs in Maharashtra get to avail of education quota, and about 60% missed benefits due to procedural difficulties and systemic exclusion criteria. However, through this

public policy study, it is evident that the marginal sections are getting the benefit of educational mobility and make benefit of educational policy at the higher education level, Weisskopf (2005) defined it as positive discrimination.

Economic, Social and Political Opportunity in Policy Move

Similarly, as an educational opportunity is accessible, it ultimately led its associate wheels to gear up. Educational opportunity first brought occupational changes, a shift from traditional occupation to modern occupation, and even the white-collar job disassociates the SCs from their traditional occupation and STs from social alienation, stigma of backwardness/forest dweller and gives them hope of achieving a high status. As the occupation/stigmatization changed, the economic status of the SCs/STs has also changed; on that basis of their economic status, the SC/ST as an individual made efforts to achieve one step ahead to obtain their political voting right to contest for a people's representative and wider political participation. In political participation, a shift from voting to the opportunity of being people's representative was observed. With this educational, economic and political opportunity, social mobility ultimately increased, which not only detached them from their traditional occupation but also caused social hatred and discrimination (Bhoi, 2016;Wankhede, 1999), the development of tribes depends on the liberative pedagogy, living conditions for social educational transformation (Bhoi, 2020; Heredia, 1995; Jojo, 2015; Shah et al., 2020). An important shift is required for both SCs and STs which transit from disrespect to respect, stigmatization to liberative, discrimination to preference. These shifts are called an educational weapon to protect and move forward in the social race.

Of the students interviewed, 77% opined that educational opportunity boosts the economic, political and social mobility among SCs/STs. They moved from their traditional occupations/stigmatization of backwardness to white-collar jobs and gained social respect and political representation in the society. A qualitative explanation presented that many of the students narrated that education is the only means that can stop their social tyranny and oppression by shifting from traditional occupation to modern occupation and away from backwardness to mainstream education based on their choice instead of hereditary transformation/inhabitant status, as Ambedkar (1948) argued education has much importance for scheduled classes or tribal areas. In this connection, a student Pradosh (29) from ST background said:

> Economic and social opportunity will come as the marginal section gets educated, organised, and agitated, we need to be educated and unite and fight for our rights. When one can get educated, one will obviously get exposure to correct choices and decisions in the thought process as well and for a constructive society. Educational opportunity helps us in getting a better job as well as respect in the society and makes us eligible to read and understand about their social and political rights and demands and participate as a representative.

Here, it is argued that educational opportunities supported by the national fellowship system can bring changes in society. Particularly, through this fellowship policy of RGNF, students opined attaining higher education was possible only because of the national fellowship. And this exposure to higher levels of education gives them educational opportunities that can help for an economic, political and socially dignified life in a mobility drift (Ibarra, 2001). Similarly, socio-economic and political attainment and empowerment can only be possible through the social policies engaged in creating educational opportunity (Mohanty, 2007; Rai, 2002).

Fellowship a Cultural Capital for the Margins

In the argument of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984), accessing and achieving education are determined by the cultural capital of the child. In an academic setting, the habitus and cultural capital bring social inequality, as the cultural capital draws out here from the parent's economic and social background. The relationship habitus and cultural capital reproduced social inequality through the education system. Habitus is like Husserl's concept of lifeworld, describing the dispositions or forms of subjectivity connected with a person's material and corporeal and symbolic attributes. Here, Bourdieu (1984) analyses the role of cultural capital in determining educational outcomes and educational achievement and retaining social status.

Among the SC and ST students who are getting fellowship, most (about 84%) of them capitalize their fellowship for their study, and they make use of the fellowship for their academic advancement, purchasing books, attending and presenting research papers at conferences and helping their family members for educational mobility. Though they did not have a parental cultural background, they capitalize the fellowship and make the utmost of their fellowship for academic attainments. Though a few of them could not capitalize or properly use their fellowship with their family and social constraints. Other than these there were also students who dropout and face many other issues and are not able to capitalize their fellowship as the major systematic difficulties aroused by higher educational institutions and fellowship releasing bodies. In these situations, public policy became an important mediator in making cultural capital from the National Fellowship which shorts by sixteen percent.

However, the study found that 72% of ST/SC students reported to have been mocked by other students to have availed the free money from the government welfare schemes in the name of fellowship. The perception that the SC/ST students are not utilizing or able to capitalize their fellowship properly was disproved through this study as Lima (27) from the ST background narrated:

> I used the fellowship for purchasing books, buying tickets to travel for attending seminars, and presenting papers both at national and international level. I could also purchase a laptop and audio recorder for my research, which would have been just a dream for my family background. I come from an ST background and due to the fellowship, I can continue my higher study and I am sure I am using the national fellowship in the right direction. However, many times the clerical staff treat me backward and *jangli* (forest dweller in a derogatory sense) and they intentionally hold up my fellowship and make remarks that the government is wasting public money on these *jangli*.

The narration shows that the STs are not only stopped from availing their fellowship in time but also the clerical staff make derogatory remarks and humiliate them due to their fellowship. In contrast, ST students are really utilizing their fellowship, and the fellowship became the cultural capital for them and they get rid of deprivation and social exclusion by utilizing their fellowship (Bhoi & Lakra, 2019).

Public Policy Snags at Implementing the Fellowship

Of the students receiving fellowship, about 33% of students are facing difficulties in receiving their fellowship. All over India, many students are selected for the fellowship, but their fellowships are either pending at their university level or are stuck with the funding body (ToI, 2014). A few students narrated that they face problems in sending their documents to reach at UGC, and there are cases where there is delay from the UGC staff. As a result, students are facing problems in accessing their fellowship in time. The scheme is planned very well and objectified for higher educational inclusion; however, there are

systemic-level difficulties in its implication and access to the SC and ST students. In his university setting, Pradeep (29) from SC background has faced difficulties to access the national fellowship for his higher study. He said:

> As I saw my name in the selection list of the fellowship, I was extremely happy and aspired to many expectations of availing a smooth research fellowship. I thought the days would be easier for me. But I kept on waiting and the award letter of the RGNF never reached me. I asked the institutional authority if they have received the list of students selected from UGC? In response to it, they kept on playing with me, they would say 'come tomorrow we will check the list'. Once I went the other day, they would again say, 'sorry we are busy, can you come next week?' Late that evening I got to know, one of the general category student's award letter was also not received by him, for the Junior Research Fellowship (JRF). For him this official had made a special telephone call to UGC, enquiring about his status of the letter and disbursement of the amount, but they ignored my case….

The public policy in higher education was intentionally delayed for the SC students for which they followed up, but the institute authority does not listen to him, but in case of general category Junior Research Fellowship (JRF), they immediately resolve the issues. Similarly, Bhoi and Lakra (2017) argued that the delayed fellowship disbursement is a major challenge in higher education, especially for SC and ST students. The difficulties do not end here, as Pradeep said further:

> …after three weeks of consistent follow-up, the official gave me some space to open the list he had received from UGC stating our list of selected students for the fellowship, he found my name there in and said, 'this is a big mistake, I could have called to UGC again, but you know I am going very busy these days, so can you go and check with UGC office in New Delhi, so that we receive your award letter and money all together?' By now I had understood, I am treated this way, because of my family identity. That administrative staff had created many other issues saying, 'your letter has not come; you go to the UGC for follow-up'. During that time, I had no money, so it was not easy for me to travel to follow-up my fellowship. When I chased it through mailing the UGC personnel and they faxed the letter to the university, the university asked me for my freshly issued caste certificate. Though I had my old caste certificate, they asked me to submit a new certificate for the current year. In this process I went to my home state again and prepared my certificate and submitted it to the university. When I got my fellowship most of the time was passed from the total duration of my research and I had spent so much money travelling to so many places to be physically present to fulfil the requirements of the time.

The entire narration of Pradeep explains that he was facing difficulties getting his fellowship, which was supposed to support his study, but practically he had problems accessing it. This way the marginal section students get trouble to access their fellowship (Gautam, 2013; Minz, 2020). Policy snags are also becoming a problem in students widening participation (Bowen & Bok, 1999). Though the public policy has an important role in enhancing the educational access of marginal section students at higher education level, the issues in its implementation became major challenges in accessing higher education and availing the public policy (Bhoi, 2016; David, 2004; Msigwa, 2016; Reay et al., 2002).

Hindrances in Availing Fellowship as Capital

The struggle of marginal section students is clearly visible here in this section where the marginal community students are not able to continue the course as they drop out from the courses due to the difficulties in availing, transferring and continuing the fellowships (Bhoi & Lakra, 2019). In this study, data revealed that about 33% of students are facing delays, transfer and curtail issues in receiving their

national fellowship. To its qualitative narration, few students experienced many difficulties to access the national fellowship. They narrated that they have not got anything so far after getting selected in RGNF even after two years of enrolment and submission of their joining and progress report. They said that when they approached the UGC, which is supposed to disburse the money, they are being snubbed by officials saying that they do not talk to students.

Sometimes, their university blames the UGC, and the university blames the UGC about the utilization certificate. In case of transfer, the UGC asks to submit both the utilization and transfer certificates from both institutes with the return of the unspent amount, but neither UGC nor the universities or institutes sort out the issues. They failed even after asking Right to Information on the transfer issues. Some of them also had their fellowship stopped without any reason. Though the RGNF is a very good scheme, its implementation and allocation have problems, such as delaying, transferring and curtailing the fellowship; these are the issues and challenges in availing the welfare schemes at the higher education level. A student, Sulochona (27), from an ST background said:

> I have faced many difficulties to get my fellowship amount, like, the clerical staff and other officials of the bank have not supported to release my fellowship on time. Initially, they were creating problems to start my fellowship with one or other unnecessary reasons. Sometimes, my supervisor did not sign my fellowship paper and sometimes the registrar held my fellowship paper to get the signature. Sometimes the personal assistant of the registrar kept the fellowship paper in a different place which resulted in delaying my fellowship. I also felt that my institute making trouble for me due to my tribal identity and habitation, once I heard a derogatory comment from the university authority that 'why are you worrying about fellowship, in your interior village have you got everything in time, why are you expecting here'. Even many times, UGC releases money very late. These delays affect my timely educational needs which affect my plan and strategy of studying and doing field work and any other educational expenses.

The educational journey for a tribe is very hard, even if they are selected for the fellowship, due to intentional delay of authority at university as well as UGC, the students from marginal communities face difficulties to avail their fellowship, which ultimately delayed other academic activities. On top of this, they were also humiliated by the university staff in the process of their realizing of fellowship (Bhoi, 2016; Rana & Devi, 2017).

Hard-hearted Perception and Stigma in Accessing Public Policy

The social hatred perception against the marginal section students in the academic sphere ruined life and education. People at the university sphere did not understand the logic behind positive discrimination, or affirmative action. Even inclusive schemes are also negatively perceived by teachers, staff and fellow students (Bhoi, 2022). Staff perceive SC students get facilities and avail the RGNF without any talent, and the government is wasting money on the SCs, but they do not understand welfare schemes and inclusionary strategies at higher education levels. There is also a perception that the *Schaddu* (a derogatory term) is getting money from the government freely, which is being frequently said by fellow students, staff, and sometimes teachers (Guru, 2009). Sometimes, the teachers (guides) do not sign reports and other documents in time, and some guides intentionally write to the UGC to stop the fellowship. Some of the teachers intentionally do not pass them in their subjects, which became an obstruction for the SC students to progress the paperwork for getting the fellowship. Through this type of discrimination, the SC students became systematically excluded from accessing the national fellowship.

Supporting these, 85% SC and ST opined that they have faced stigmatized attitude from their clerical staff, teacher and peers connecting to their fellowship in their educational institutions. The academic and non-academic staff engaged in stooping the educational opportunity of marginal section students, which was reflected from the attitude of the teacher in discriminatory evaluation and academic perception as 'Schaddu' makes the SC/ST students weaken socially, academically, psychologically and economically because of stopping their fellowship other academic participations. Connecting to this, another student, Prafulla (26), from the SC background said:

> I was also not able to clear the coursework in PhD, until I cleared the coursework the university did not allow me to do the research, so, I was unable to start my fellowship and I have not been able to submit substantial progress, so, I was not availing the fellowship amount which created a problem for me to pay the tuition fees and hostel fees even the mess charges for food. Due to these difficulties, I have managed to live without food for some days in the initial years of my fellowship.

Accessing public policy is very challenging than the difficulties, and social connotation and derogatory words are stopper in the progress of marginal sections at the higher educational institutions, the stories of Prafulla show how he survived without food and amount of the fellowship due to the technicalities of the universities and failing of course work created problems for him to avail the fellowship; this was also discussed by the scholars where the university intentionally created problems for the marginal sections to access higher education through public policy (Bhoi, 2016; Rai, 2002).

Academic's Attitude and Behaviour Towards Margins

The study looked at the perception of non-marginals on the marginal students receiving government fellowship to attain higher education. About 72% of students faced questioning on fellowship, many times they have been asked for explanations by classmates, hostel staff and other supporting staff over their expenses. Shyam (27) from SC background said:

> *One day Rahul told me*, you are wasting the government's money in buying clothes. I was really hurt by this. It took me to think over and over this incident. Was I really wasting the government's money to buy a pair of shirts and pants to go to the classes? *But didn't Rahul ever notice before receiving the fellowship, I had a torn shirt that I had stitched in hand to wear to the university for class? Did he ever notice that?* But my new shirt and pants were noticed by all my classmates, hostel staff and others. That whole day whoever saw me had passed comments not of appreciation but of apprehension saying…oh Shyam…so you have got the fellowship to buy new clothes?…you look good in charity clothes by the government, so on and many more such comments were what I had sadly been told that day that had continued till next few days.

This explanation shows how in-capable our Indian curriculum has been that fails to make everyone aware of the Indian social system, their socio-economic realities and realities of the most vulnerable segments. Similarly, Rout (2015) and Minz (2020) found that social and academic attitudes played an important role in explaining the realities of functioning public policy at the higher education level.

In addition, how the national fellowship system was able to have confidence and feed the scholars and fulfil their basic needs and engaged them in study became crystal clear when Rita (26) from the ST background explains:

> This is the first time in my life I have gone to class having a full plate of meals. Or else in my entire life, I can only remember, we have always had less food on plate and that too we had to share among all the siblings, going to school in half-filled stomachs. The RGNF has supported me to have the basics in my life. Many times, people laugh at my height, but will they ever understand, my community suffers malnourishment due to poverty. Shortage of food and malnourishment made dwarf in realistic sense. So, if people say I am wasting money buying this or that or are policing on my expenses I ask them, have you ever seen hunger, poverty for generations, poor living conditions in huts, with no work or income of parents that could buy any basic things that usually a parent gets for his/her kid. We (ST/SCs) are tired of fighting for survival and today others say that we are enjoying fellowships? In what sense this makes them say so, can't an individual have rights to his own thoughts, what s/he feels like to do for his better tomorrow? Yes, if I fail to study and attain my research targets, tell me over that if you have guts? Surprisingly, my difficulties and your (affluent sections) comfortable journey has been one starting point, and you have still not been able to compete in my class assessment scorecards.

For Rita, it was an opportunity to become cultural and social capital that comes from the public policy promoted by the state. However, at the same time from the university premises, she heard that she is wasting money and misutilizing fellowship, which was not true; a student from marginal communities has many problems, and overcoming that problem and entering higher education itself is an achievement and along with the study buying basic necessities of living is justiciable, but people make different meaning of it. If we go back to Bourdieu (1984), all comes under cultural capital which a marginal section student gathers from the public policy offered by the state.

Process of De-marginalization in Fellowship System

Connecting to overcoming the struggle in academic retention, this paper found that for many of the challenges in accessing fellowship and for reducing student dropout, a few easy procedures can be adopted. The struggle of marginalization can be ended through a forward–backward looking approach in implementing reservation policy (Koehler & Chopra, 2015; Mohanty, 2007). Likewise, in the case of the national fellowship system, 64% SC and ST students opined that they suffer a systematic fellowship disbursement, due to which they have faced challenges in filling the form, preparing proposals and progress report and guidance and administrative issues along with the release of fellowship and bank procedures. Regarding the public policy transformation to cultural capital and de-marginalization, Prafulla (aged 26) explains:

> If there is an 'easy' fellowship management system, it can fulfil the aims and objectives of the national fellowship system and contribute towards creation of cultural capital for the marginals. Including monthly basis of fellowship, good hostel facilities and discrimination free fellowship disbursement system and fellowship management board managed by marginal communities can strengthen the fellowship system and a key in retaining students from marginal communities in higher education.

As McKenna and Bargh (1998) argued de-marginalization process is quite a difficult job in the current system of national fellowship disbursement, as there are many components in realizing fellowship for the marginal section. First, the selection system, which seems to be quite reasonable, which select the students from marginal communities, coming from marginal communities to reach higher education itself is an achievement for them, and on top of that getting through the fellowship system is commendable. However, the real journey of the fellowship started in the implementation part, and availing of the fellowship is another part where the teacher/guide/ supervisor, clerical staff and administrative staff at

the national level play a role in realizing fellowship. From all of them, making an easy system and less paperwork and the marginal communities member requirement at the apex and the university levels is vital to make the process of de-marginalization a bit quicker (Bhoi, 2016, Bhoi & Lakra, 2019; Senthilkumar Solidarity Committee, 2008). This is clear from the opinion of Prafulla in this study.

Need of Accountable and Transparent Fellowship Management

The study also found 84% of students supported the idea of having a more accountable and transparent official management system for the release of the fellowship amount. This can help students to understand where the problem lies in the procedure so that it can be addressed rightly for the students to receive the fellowship smoothly. About 87% students suggest that at the university level, there should be fellowship follow-up service centres or boards where the students should be able to reach for redressals to approach for proceeding of fellowship from start to smooth continuation. Connecting to transparent system, Rita (26) opined:

> In my opinion, the fellowship system should be more transparent which should away from the institutional systemic difficulties and bank documents' procedural challenges along with caste social identity, isolation, stigma, branding backward and discrimination need to be resolve at higher educational and fellowship releasing body by reducing complexities.

The opinion of Rita also makes it clear that there is a need for accountable and transparent fellowship which can enhance the purpose of the national fellowship system and support in making easy procedural and right implementation of fellowship for the marginal sections. This ultimately became a larger opportunity for their socio-economic development as Rout (2015) similarly argued in his study.

Nexus Between Social Identities and Fellowship Releasing

Surprisingly, about 83% of SC and ST students share that due to their caste and tribal identities, many times their fellowships were at stake. The release of the fellowship was not an issue for the JRF and fellowship for Other Backward Class. Likewise, the social identity of the marginal section is always attached with many checkposts (Bhoi & Lakra, 2019), connecting to this Mohan (aged 25) from the SC background explains:

> Each time I go to submit my monthly progress-reports, they take up all efforts to mess up with my fellowship. They bring out loops in the documents, they behave weird with un-rightful words. The mentality and discretionary behaviour of the clerical staff needs to be changed through some legal mandate. Here I say it monthly, because the officials have compelled me to submit and take signatures every month, I understand this is to only trouble me. Many times, I have revolted against this saying, we are supposed to do this once in every six months, but they keep on scaring me saying, if you do not follow this, we will write to UGC to stop your fellowship. Thinking of the consequences I try to meet all the deadlocks of the officials, even though they are not the UGC mandates.

Fellowship releasing an identity of the marginal community students always coming as *Quata-bala/ Schaddu* or many more derogatory words which Guru (2009) also finds in his study. It is not limited to the derogatory world; systematically, the university administration stops the fellowship of marginal

section students in the name of incomplete paperwork and green signal from the supervisor and dean which is never a problem for the general category students for releasing their JRF. The identity of students is a major marker of releasing fellowship .It is very much clear from the evidence of Mohan. Similarly, Bhoi and Lakra (2019) and Minz (2020) also found that social identity is a major challenge in releasing fellowship for the marginal section students at the higher education level.

Equal Dignity Cell in Resolving Fellowship Issues

Students testified their departmental clerks and officials have laughed at them and tried to insult them or scold them with inappropriate adjectives when they reached out to them for resolving any discrepancies for the disbursal of the fellowship (Bhoi, 2016). About 85% of students opined that fellowship release staff have made fun of them and laughed and scolded them when they approach them to find out what are the issues for non-disbursement of their fellowship and the *equal dignity cell* to be made active to handle differential behaviour of the university officials. In such conditions, Mohan (27) explains:

> Action should be taken on such officials, if this is brought in the notice of a respective institute's cells that should give efforts to resolve my fellowship issue, these cells should be easily accessible and not threatening to the marginal community students. I think if these cells are introduced, the clerk and officials can be checked to say or show any derogatory comments/behaviour in future to anyone.

The monitoring and evaluation body should be an option for the delivery of public policy especially for the national fellowship system at the higher education level. Here, Mohan rightly explains there is a need for a body that can be a watchdog to the behaviour of university staff towards marginal section students. Along with the disbursement of the fellowship in time there should be a body which can look after the dignity and good mental condition for the students from the marginal background which can stop the humiliation faced by them. That can rightly be called an equal dignity cell at the university in the process of national fellowship disbursement. Similarly, Bhoi and Lakra (2019) argued that along with the university, equal dignity cell the at national level there should have an evaluation body for the smooth release of fellowship as well as laws for stopping direct and indirect discrimination against the marginal communities.

Conclusion

The national fellowship system is one of the important public policies which is really a means for creating cultural capital for the marginal section students. Those who have been 'deprived of' to have social and cultural capital since historically, they are denied basic social and economic resources in the society (Bhoi, 2016; Bhoi & Lakra, 2019). Marginality of the SC and ST communities is the cause of long deprivation of social, economic and educational opportunity, aiming to achieve educational opportunity especially higher educational opportunity is a major aspiration factor for their empowerment. Coming from such a background and entering higher education itself is an achievement for the marginal section student. Forming cultural capital through public policy, especially the national fellowship system, is an opportunity which can empower them to get rid of their deprivation.

However, the conditions of marginal section students in accessing the public policy and their experiences are analysed and it is concluded that the higher educational success of marginal students is folded with the multiple difficulties, including social perception, caste- and tribe-based stigma and careless attitudes and ruthless behaviour. In functioning or running and continuing the public policy is attached with discriminatory behaviours and jealous activities in the academic setting. Where the public policy is not effusively creating cultural capital which is supposed to be the panacea for inequality, means of equity and bearer of de-marginalization process, public policy was the carrier of cultural capital where 'State can be the cultural capital' for marginal sections over Bourdieu.

The national fellowship system for the SC and STs is a marvellous effort by the state or the government of India to include the SC and ST students in higher education. It has aimed to boost the economic, political and social empowerment of SC and ST students. Although real mobility will happen with the support system or proper implementation of national fellowship system for marginal section students at higher education. The national fellowship system for marginal sections is the cultural capital for these students to capitalize their higher education for their socio-economic and political upliftment. There are difficulties and challenges in accessing the fellowship. Because of systematic difficulties, these students are not able to get their fellowship at university, institute, bank, UGC and ministry level. The students scuffle as they are not able to receive their fellowship sometimes; they have cases of not receiving it from months to years. Some students faced issues when fellowships did not start since their selection, and some had issues with transfer of the fellowship from their previous university/institute to another. Some fellowships were curtailed in between. Many students faced a delay in the timely disbursement of their fellowships, and they even complained about it, but the UGC either did not bother much about their problem despite the students visiting the UGC office or have been slow to address the issue.

In addition to these administrative issues, students complained of have been facing academic discrimination from their teachers, university/institute staff and fellow students during the process. Sarcastic comments, stigmatized treatment to the marginal section students on the name of fellowship became a riddle in their participation and continuation of the study and for further mobility. Though there are challenges to receiving the amount of fellowship, few students managed to fight against the system and finally availed the fellowship.

Based on the finding, it can be suggested that the follow-up body can be set up for the evaluation of national fellowship system and its functioning, establishing tribunals for mishandling of fellowship, representative of marginal community in the disbursement of fellowship and follow-up officials. There should be intermediary institutions' intervention in releasing the amount and regularizing the fellowships which the students can get at the end of every month need to be done. The formula quartile preference (location based) can be given to the most disadvantaged among the marginal students. In addition to that, instead of scheme promotion, the national fellowship system was initiated as a programme to cover a greater number of SC and ST students in this fellowship. It can be extended up to master-level courses instead of only research scholars. The national fellowship system for marginal sections is a very good scheme for the educational inclusion of SCs and STs in higher education, yet it needs to be extended further with follow-up evaluation schemes, and a national system should be developed for its smooth functioning. The suggested steps can create cultural capital through public policy intervention.

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